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ABSTRACT

This guide presents ideas on communication for managers who work with young, entry-level workers in small businesses. The guide is designed to help managers (1) understand how perceptions of the same message differ; (2) recognize barriers to good communication and ways to eliminate them; and (3) construct messages so that they will be understood clearly. The guide uses case studies to illustrate the communication process and how it can go awry. Key points are summarized at the end of the booklet, and a review quiz with answers is provided. A list of suggested resources completes the guide. (KC)

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Do You Hear What I Hear?

Communicating With Young Workers

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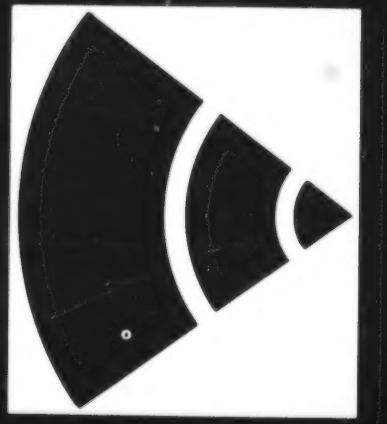

Do You Hear What I Hear?

Communicating With Young Workers

the WorkForce series
for small businesses

The National Child Labor Committee
1501 Broadway • New York, New York 10036

3

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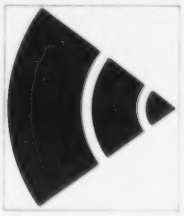

What This Guide Will Help You Do More Effectively

- Understand how perceptions of the same message differ.
- Recognize barriers to good communication and ways to eliminate them.
- Construct messages so that they will be understood clearly.

Take a Good Look

1. Look at the picture above. Sketch the face of the person you see.

2. Now look at the picture again. Do you see a different face? Describe it.

This illustration has two faces: a sophisticated young woman in a large fur coat and an old woman wearing a scarf around her head.

The picture is important because it illustrates the single most important fact of communication: two people can look at the same thing and see something different.

The way a person sees things — the way someone receives a message — is determined by his or her culture, experiences, age, and upbringing. For example, in some countries speaking loudly means you are excited; in others, it means you are angry.

Those differences in perceptions at work means that signals sometimes get crossed when people with different upbringing and experiences try to talk to one another. A fifty-year-old manager doesn't understand whether an eighteen-year-old loves or hates a shirt he describes as "bad." Similarly, a young worker takes offense when his boss calls him "son."

Incidents like these illustrate the truth of the old joke: I know you think you know what I said but what you think you heard isn't what I think I said.

What you say may not be what the worker hears. Similarly, what the worker says may not be what you hear, especially if you and the worker are different ages, are from different ethnic groups, or have different backgrounds.

Unconscious Perceptions

Everyone who receives messages filters them through their feelings about the sender. That is, everyone considers the source of the message as they decide how to interpret it. For example, most of us would react very differently to the message "come here right now" if it came from a four-year-old child than if it came from a police officer in a dark and deserted street. The message may be the same, but it is received differently because it comes from a different sender.

This is an example of an unconscious perception. We don't stop to think why we react to a police officer's command differently than we react to a child's, we just do it unconsciously.

More often, unconscious perceptions color our relations with *kinds* of people rather than with individuals. We hear messages differently because they come from blacks or from women or from young people or from handicapped people. Our perceptions of the messages these people send are deeply conditioned by our upbringing and our culture.

Some people, for example, don't listen to what women say about finances because they don't believe women are naturally very good at math. People who grew up in all-white neighborhoods may believe blacks can't be trusted because they have never known any blacks.

These cultural biases undermine communications on the job and create costly misunderstandings. Part of your responsibility as a supervisor is to overcome these barriers so that you can really hear what employees are saying.

That means being sensitive to the language you use. Work not to let these factors affect your judgement of how well a worker does the job or which jobs are appropriate for the worker to do.

Unconscious Perceptions about Young People

Many people think that young people are lazy, or that they think they know everything so don't want to learn. Very often people perceive young people as hot-tempered or easily distracted or uncaring about work.

All of these perceptions are wrong. Young people have a lot of energy and want to do a good job. However, the signals which say "I don't care" to you may well mean "I don't understand" to a youth.

Remember that the cultural and generational differences between you and a young worker run in both directions. You have trouble reading young workers' signals, but they have a hard time reading your signals too. Patience and care can help you reach a common language. Listen carefully and be aware of your own unconscious perceptions.

When you were a teenager, you wanted to work hard and do a good job, but you weren't always sure how to do that. The young workers you employ are just like you were: eager but uncertain. Looking more closely at a young worker's signals will help you get past that and on to the work at hand.

CASE STUDY

Here Boy!

John Darrell was a very young black man who worked as an office assistant in a distributing company. The owner of the company, Bill Hurst, was a 61-year-old man who had started the company thirty years ago.

Bill liked hiring young people and teaching them the business, allowing them to work their way up to responsible jobs at their own pace. Several people on the staff had begun their careers with Bill and had remained employees for over twenty years. He felt as though they were family.

Bill thought that John showed a lot of promise. He wanted to tell John that he was going to increase his responsibilities in a new phase of the business. Bill came out of his office and spotted John. He said, "There you are, my boy. Would you come into my office please."

John turned to another worker and said, "Who the hell does he think he's talking to?"

CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

John was offended when Bill called him "boy." John heard it as a racial slur. Even if, on reflection, he were to realize this was not Bill's intent, his first reaction was anger at something he was conditioned to regard as an affront. On the other hand, Bill probably saw it as a natural thing to say given the difference in their ages.

The basic cause of the misunderstanding was a difference in how each of the people viewed the word "boy." The difference in age, race, background, and upbringing made John hear a slur and Bill hear familiarity. "Boy" is a word with a long history of racism that no good intentions can erase. Bill should have been more aware of his language so that the problem could have been prevented in the first place.

CASE STUDY

Friends

David Jackson, a young black youth, was hired as an internal messenger and mail room clerk in a law firm.

When he began the job, the office manager, Laura Ramich, told him that it was an important part of his job to be courteous and friendly. However, she cautioned him that often the attorneys would not extend these qualities to him, "Just take it in stride and remember not to take it personally. Keep on being friendly and well mannered. I know you can do it."

David was on the job for over a month when Laura called him in for a conference. "David, we're all very happy with your work," she told him. "You've learned quickly and have done the work well. But there is a problem. Many of the attorneys have come to me to complain that you are too friendly. They are very upset about this."

"Too friendly!" David cut in. "When I took this job you told me I had to be friendly. What do these people want?"

CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

When Laura told David to be friendly and courteous she meant a particular form of behavior. Differences in age and background caused the problem here. To David, being friendly meant one thing — to the attorneys, it meant something else.

Laura should have been more specific when telling David to be friendly. She should have defined the difference between being friendly and being overly familiar. David needed to know *precisely* the type of behavior that was expected.

Laura can smooth the attorneys' ruffled feathers and explain to David exactly what she meant by "friendly." She should also explain that in this kind of business a certain degree of decorum is expected, the reasons for it, and give examples of the specific behavior she wants from him.

A Systematic Approach To Communication

Communication is the transfer of information from one person to another. The person receiving the message doesn't have to agree with it, but must hear the same thing you said for communication to work.

Communications travel in two directions: the message goes from the sender to the receiver, and feedback goes from the receiver back to the sender. Together, the sender, the receiver, the message and the feedback make up a *communications system.*

The Sender

Your responsibility as a sender is to construct the message in such a way that the likelihood of it getting misunderstood is diminished. That is, your job is to make the message clear to the receiver. That means approaching the message by thinking about what the receiver is likely to hear.

Your first consideration is language: use words the receiver will understand. You wouldn't tell a child to "ambulate from the domicile to the recreation area in the rear of the abode." You would say, "Go play in the back yard." By the same token, don't use insider's jargon when you talk to a new worker. Say "Take the profit and loss statements to the accountant's office" instead of "Run the P&L's by the CPA."

Be particularly careful to avoid jargon when you are teaching a new worker to do something. They will pick up the jargon as they learn the job, but at first it is more difficult to remember the special language than to learn the task itself.

Similarly, be careful when you use slang. Slang you grew up with may mean something very different to a teenager today. Slang is a kind of inside joke, and it tends to exclude people who aren't familiar with the culture it grew out of. Finally, many slang terms are derived from sexual, ethnic, or racial slurs. You may not think of them that way, but people who hear it will. You could end up insulting someone you don't intend to insult, and that can be a big problem on the job.

Another aspect of language is how you direct a worker to do something. Do you request that the worker do it? Command it? Suggest it? Remember to be clear about the message you want to convey — particularly to a young worker who may not understand all of your signals. Don't say "Would you mind taking out the garbage" when you mean "Get the garbage out of here immediately." By the same token, don't use orders when priorities are low; that is the time for a request.

Be Consistent

When you make up a message, make sure you are being consistent. On one level this means don't tell workers to oil the left side of the machine first on Monday and then tell them to oil the right side first on Tuesday. If you change your mind, tell the worker that you are making a change — otherwise, you will have nothing but confusion on your hands.

The other side of being consistent is making sure that the message you are giving nonverbally is the same as the message you are giving verbally.

Your tone of voice should reflect what

you really mean. If you say something that seems to be friendly in a cold, sarcastic tone of voice, you will confuse the receiver. If you are angry, say so. If you are happy, say that too. People look for clues to your meaning in the tone of your voice, so be careful not to give a mixed message.

Gestures and body language also help tell the receiver what you mean. For example, looking away from people when you are speaking to them will make them think you are preoccupied or nervous. Similarly, leaning toward a person or reaching to touch them as you speak will make them feel more drawn into the conversation. Again, consistency is the most important thing. Make sure that you aren't giving one message verbally and another message with your body.

Eye contact is another kind of body language. If you look directly at the person you are talking to, you will come across as clear and confident. On the other hand, if you look over the other person's head or study the floor, you will look nervous and evasive. Good eye contact is essential if you want to persuade someone, and most people look for acceptance by looking into another's eyes.

Touching is one kind of nonverbal communication that can be problematic. Because our culture isn't generally one which approves of a lot of touching, physical contact can be misinterpreted easily. For example, if an older man puts his hand on a younger man's shoulder as he explains something, it will usually be taken as a signal of reassurance and involvement. However, a young black who isn't used to that kind of contact may perceive it as condescension, and a young woman could perceive it as a sexual advance.

If your verbal message and the message of your touch are consistent, there is a much smaller chance that either one will be misinterpreted. As you get to know workers better, you will learn to read one another's signals, so the cultural differences tend to disappear.

Make sure that you are paying equal attention to the signals that workers are giving you. Are workers too familiar or too stand-offish? Let them know what level of physical contact is appropriate for your job site.

Think About Time and Place

Part of your responsibility as a sender is to pick the time and place to give the message. Timing is everything, as comedians say, and you should pay special attention to it. In short, that means telling people that they have done something wrong when it happens, not three days later. That also means not starting a long, intense discussion at the end of the day when people are tired and can't think.

As a rule, make a point to talk about sensitive issues privately. Don't chew someone out in front of a customer or in front of his or her co-workers. That is not only humiliating for the worker who has made the mistake, but will undermine morale among other workers and make them lose respect for you.

When you have something important to say to a worker, pick a quiet, private place to talk. This will not only make it easier for the worker to hear and understand what you have to say, but it will make it easier for you to hear what the worker is saying too. Quiet is *essential* if you are trying to teach a worker a new task: who can learn in the middle of ringing phones and interruptions by other workers?

CASE STUDY

The Slouch

Sol Seymour owned a small record shop. Sol wanted to meet with Buck, one of his clerks, to evaluate his performance and plan future work. When Buck entered the back office, Sol immediately felt that something was wrong. Buck was slouching and kept his head down, looking at the floor. When Sol asked him what was upsetting him, Buck said that everything was O.K.

During the meeting, Buck kept fidgeting in his chair and looking at the floor. Sol said to him, "Look, Buck, it's obvious you're under some kind of stress. You're not paying attention and you seem worried. Why don't we talk about it before we continue the evaluation?"

Buck replied that he was afraid he would have to quit his job to get one in a different field that paid more money. When Sol asked why, he replied that his girl friend was pregnant and they were going to get married. "I don't want to do it. I really like this job, but I need more money," said Buck.

What did Buck do that made Sol realize that something was wrong?

CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

Buck exhibited stress through body language. It wasn't what he said but the non-verbal message that made Sol realize something was wrong. In fact, at first Buck denied that he was upset. Body language is a strong force in communications. Often it contradicts what is being said verbally. People pick up on body language even on a subconscious level.

The Receiver

Your responsibility as a supervisor is not only to send messages well but to receive them carefully too. That means listening well — not merely hearing the words the worker is saying, but making them register.

Your job as a listener is to hear what the worker is trying to say, not the message you want to hear or the message you think the worker ought to give. Don't let your feelings about the message turn you off. You can't respond to the worker unless you have heard all his signals properly.

Here are some ways to listen more effectively:

- **Be interested in the subject.**
  If it is important enough for the worker to bring up, it is important enough for you to hear.

- **Pay attention.**
  Concentrate on the facts the worker is conveying.

- **Don't criticize.**
  Don't judge the message or the youth until you have listened to the whole thing.

- **Don't plan ahead. Listen.**
  Don't prepare a response until you have heard the entire message.

Look for the Whole Message

Look at what the worker is saying with his body. Are you getting one message from the words and another from the worker's posture? The worker may be telling you she doesn't like the job, but the *message* may be that she doesn't understand how to do all of the tasks properly and is afraid she can't learn.

Think about where the worker is coming from when you listen. What kind of language is the worker using? How does he or she understand that language? What is the worker trying to convey?

Feedback is the single most important part of communicating well. It is an opportunity for the sender and the receiver to check that they both are acting on the same message. Take advantage of the opportunity to correct a misunderstanding before it becomes a problem.

CASE STUDY

What'd Ya Say?

Charlie Aherle supervises a group of workers in the stockroom of a large retail store. He wanted to tell his workers that the store would be closed the following Monday for a complete physical inventory, and they might be required to work overtime to complete the job.

Charlie decided to send a written memo to everyone in his department so that they would understand the situation. This is the memo Charlie sent:

* * *

Monday

To: **Stock Workers**

From: **Charlie Aherle**

Re: **Inventory**

We will be closed on Monday. We have to take inventory. Everyone will work until everything is counted.

* * *

1. Has Charlie given the stock workers all the information they need?

2. How could he have improved his memo?

CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

Charlie's message is a poor communication for a number of reasons. It is not clear. On which Monday will inventory be taken? Is this the annual inventory? Is only this department involved?

Charlie's memo raises more questions than it answers. It is not effective because everyone reading it will have a different interpretation, and no one will fully understand what Charlie meant to say.

Here is a better way to write the memo:

* * *

January 12, 1984

To: **Stock Workers**
From: **Charlie Aherle**
Re: **Inventory**

On Monday, January 19, 1983, the store will be closed for the annual inventory. The entire store will be closed on that day, and no stock will be received. We will make a complete physical inventory of the stock. All sales and stock workers will take part in counting.

You may be asked to work overtime if the count has not been completed by 6 p.m.

Forms and instructions for making the count will be given out on Friday, January 16.

* * *

Marshall McLuhan coined a famous phrase that describes communications in our society: "The medium is the message." That is, how you say something is part of the message you convey.

In small businesses, choosing a medium usually means choosing between oral and written communications. Both have advantages, but as a rule, use written communications when you need to keep a record or when you need to send the same message to several different people. Oral communications are best for most day-to-day exchanges with workers because you can see a response immediately.

Writing Clearly

Written messages are most useful when they are clear and concise. A good rule of thumb is to write the way you speak. Don't use long words that sound important because they confuse more than they impress. For example, write "Please send me a price list for your X-21 series of air filters" rather than "Please advise me as to the remuneration required for purchase of environmental enhancers appropriate for interface with the X-21 climate control system."

When you write, note all the relevant facts but don't confuse the reader with details he or she doesn't need to know. Ask yourself:

- What would I need to know if I were reading this?
- What does the reader know already?
- What do I want this document to accomplish?
- How would I say it if I were talking to the reader on the telephone?

Remember that neatness counts in business writing. A recent study showed that more than half of the orders received by a large mail-order company could not be filled properly because the handwriting couldn't be deciphered. If your handwriting is hard to read, print or type — that will save you time, money and aggravation in the long run.

Grammar also counts in business writing. The point is not to imagine your least favorite English teacher as the reader, but to realize that you reduce the chances of misunderstanding if your grammar helps convey your meaning. Your reader cannot see what is in your head, only what you have put on the paper. Using language correctly will put you and your reader on common ground — and that means the reader will be more likely to understand you.

CASE STUDY

What's She Like?

Richard Garcia has just hired a young woman as a clerk-typist in his manufacturing company. He was impressed with her but wanted to get some information from her previous employer, so asked for a letter of recommendation.

You are the office manager who has supervised the young woman, Crystal Yin, for the last year. She was a good clerk-typist whose typing speed had risen from 25 to 50 words per minute while she worked for you. You found her to be intelligent, easy to get along with, and eager to learn. You hate to lose her but know this is a good opportunity for her. Write her a letter of recommendation.

Write your letter here.

CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

Your letter should look something like this:

November, 1983

Mr. Richard Garcia
Beldeck Corporation
Box 2029
Denver, Colorado

Dear Mr. Garcia:

I am glad to be able to provide you with a reference for Crystal Yin. While working here, Ms. Yin was assigned to the typing pool.

When she began working here a year ago she was able to type 25 words per minute. Within three months, she had increased her typing speed to 50 words per minute and had learned all of our office procedures.

Ms. Yin is an intelligent person who learns quickly and follows instructions. She gets along well with co-workers and was respected by the entire staff.

I am certain Ms. Yin will be an asset to your company.

Sincerely,

Office Manager

Your letter should be specific in describing Crystal Yin as an employee, but should not be too long. It should be clear and to the point — you don't need, for example, to describe what your company does. Most important, your letter should say the things you would want to know in the same circumstances.

Feedback

Feedback is the most important element of a communications system. As a sender, your responsibility is to ask for clear feedback; as a receiver, your responsibility is to give it. A communication is only complete when you have checked to see if the message has been received accurately.

You cannot depend on young people to ask questions when they do not understand. Many times they are shy or think that they will appear stupid by asking.

Ask questions to make sure that the young person understands. Don't ask, "Do you understand?" Ask open-ended questions such as, "What should be done next?" or "What is the deadline on this work?"

Another way to give feedback is to reflect what you hear back to the sender. That is, put the message in your own words and check to see if you heard the right thing. For example, say, "Are you telling me that the order can't be ready until Thursday because the valves haven't come in yet?" or "Do you mean that you don't think Alice is giving you enough time to learn the job thoroughly?" Doing this allows the worker to disagree or to add more information.

Feedback prevents foul-ups. Take advantage of the opportunity.

Spread it Around

Encourage others to use good communication techniques — it won't do any good if you're the only one who speaks and listens carefully. Make a point to be open when workers want to talk. The best way to get people to say what is on their mind is to be willing to listen to them. In the long run, that not only reduces misunderstandings, but creates an atmosphere of trust which means a better team effort at work.

- **Two people can see the same message differently because they have different backgrounds and experiences. Be sensitive about how another person will respond to the language you use.**
- **Unconscious perceptions color the way we receive messages. The result can be prejudices that have no basis in facts. Don't let your unconscious perceptions determine how you hear a worker's message.**
- **Your responsibility as a sender is to give the same message verbally and non-verbally. Pick the right time and place to give the message.**
- **Your role as a receiver is to listen carefully to the verbal and the non-verbal message. Don't turn off because the message isn't what you want to hear.**
- **Pick the right medium for your message. If you need a record, write it.**
- **Give feedback when you receive a message and get it when you send one. Feedback prevents foul-ups — take advantage of the opportunity.**

Review

Check the correct answers.

1. The way someone receives a message is determined by:
   - A. Age
   - B. Culture
   - C. Religion
   - D. Experience
   - E. Upbringing
   - F. Political ideology
2. A communications system is made up of a sender, a receiver, a message, and feedback.
   ☐ True ☐ False
3. The receiver must agree with your message for communication to take place.
   ☐ True ☐ False
4. Nonverbal communication can convey a different message from the verbal message being sent.
   ☐ True ☐ False
5. When you write, you should give as much information as possible so the reader will be sure to understand.
   ☐ True ☐ False
6. One way to get feedback is to ask open-ended questions.
   ☐ True ☐ False
7. Everyone who receives messages filters them through his or her feelings about the sender.
   ☐ True ☐ False
8. Unconscious perceptions can color our relations with people.
   ☐ True ☐ False
9. To overcome cultural biases, one should be sensitive to:
   - A. The language used.
   - B. Not letting bias influence judgement about how the worker performs.
   - C. Not being influenced about which jobs are appropriate for the worker to do.
   - D. The ways in which the worker is different from you.
   - E. The way other workers perceive the youth.
10. The language you use may have one meaning for you, but may mean something else to another person.
    ☐ True ☐ False

Review Analysis

1. A, B, D, and E.	3. False.	5. False.	7. True.	9. A, B, and C.
2. True.	4. True.	6. True.	8. True.	10. True.

RESOURCES

If you want more information, you will find these books valuable.

Kenneth Blanchard, Ph.D., and Spencer Johnson, M.D. *The One Minute Manager* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1982)

A guide to increasing productivity and getting results from the people you manage.

Daniel Druckman, Richard M. Roxella, and James C. Baxter. *Nonverbal Communication: Survey, Theory and Research* (Beverly Hills, California: Sage Publications, 1982)

This book discusses the relationship between verbal and nonverbal behavior and the effects of cultural and personality differences on behavior.

William L. Siegel. *People Management for Small Business* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1978)

A guide on finding the right employee, planning a training program, communications, motivation, and evaluating employees. This is one of a series of books from this publisher geared to small business owners.

Thomas L. Moffatt. *Selection Interviewing for Managers* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1979)

An in-depth explanation of the interview and selection process from where to look for candidates through making a final decision.

John P. Wanons. *Organizational Entry: Recruitment, Selection, and Socialization of Newcomers* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1980)

A how-to-guide on matching the individual wth the job and the organization.

William H. Mobley. *Employee Turnover: Causes, Consequences, and Control* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1982)

This covers how to analyze employee turnover rates, determine the cause and the costs of turnover, and methods for reducing it.

Gordon F. Shea. *The New Employee: Developing a Productive Human Resource* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1981)

This covers task analysis, on-the-job training, and increasing productivity.

Paul Preston. *Employer's Guide to Hiring and Firing: Strategies, Tactics, Legal Considerations* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1982)

In addition to basic interviewing skills, this book deals with techniques on managing interpersonal conflicts, counseling the problem employee, and firing an employee.

The National Child Labor Committee is the nation's only private, non-profit organization which devotes a full program to the critical problem of youth employment. Run by business and voluntary leaders for more than eighty years, the Committee promotes education, training, and job opportunities for youth which are geared to the needs of the nation's businesses.

If you want more information about the Committee or its programs, write us at 1501 Broadway, New York, New York 10036.